

VOLUME NO. 51

OPINION NO. 1

PUBLIC EMPLOYEES - Right to exercise political speech;
PUBLIC OFFICERS - Right to exercise political speech;
STATUTORY CONSTRUCTION - Construing plain meaning of words of statute;
MONTANA CODE ANNOTATED - Section 2-2-121, (3), (a), (b), (c).

HELD: A public officer or public employee may engage in political speech so long as his or her speech does not involve the use of public time, facilities, equipment, supplies, personnel, or funds.

January 31, 2005

Mr. Mathew J. Johnson
Jefferson County Attorney
P.O. Box H
Boulder, MT 59632

Dear Mr. Johnson:

You have requested my opinion on a number of questions concerning public officers and political speech. I have rephrased your questions as follows:

Does Mont. Code Ann. § 2-2-121 limit a public officer's or employee's right to support or oppose a political candidate or passage of a ballot issue?

Mont. Code Ann. § 2-2-121 sets forth the rules of conduct for public officers and employees. Subsection (3) includes a prohibition against the use of public time and resources for political speech, as well as a provision protecting a public officer or employee's freedom to express personal political beliefs. It provides:

(3)(a) A public officer or public employee may not use public time, facilities, equipment, supplies, personnel, or funds to solicit support for or opposition to any political committee, the nomination or election of any person to public office, or the passage of a ballot issue unless the use is:

(i) authorized by law; or

Mr. Mathew J. Johnson

January 31, 2005

Page 2

(ii) properly incidental to another activity required or authorized by law, such as the function of an elected public officer, the officer's staff, or the legislative staff in the normal course of duties.

(b) As used in subsection (3), "properly incidental to another activity required or authorized by law" does not include any activities related to solicitation of support for or opposition to the nomination or election of a person to public office or political committees organized to support or oppose a candidate or candidates for public office. With respect to ballot issues, properly incidental activities are restricted to the activities of a public officer, the public officer's staff, or legislative staff related to determining the impact of passage or failure of a ballot issue on state or local government operations.

(c) This subsection (3) is not intended to restrict the right of a public officer or public employee to express personal political beliefs.

(Emphasis added.)

It is not personal political speech that is prohibited by subsection (3)(a); rather, it is the use of public time or resources in the presentation or furtherance of political speech. While a public officer or employee is not required to shed his public persona in order to exercise his right to free speech, he may not use public resources when expressing personal political beliefs.

Your questions pose scenarios involving elected officers, like county commissioners and sheriffs, whose unique positions require them to work a schedule outside of the typical 8 to 5 schedule of most public employees. You ask, for instance, what of the county commissioner who receives phone calls at home in the evenings, or the sheriff who is on call 24 hours a day?

In Keyishian v. Board of Regents of Univ. of State of N.Y., 385 U.S. 589, 605-606 (1967), the Supreme Court stated, "a government employee does not relinquish all First Amendment rights otherwise enjoyed by citizens just by reason of his or her employment." Likewise, a county commissioner or sheriff (or any other public employees or officers) does not relinquish her First Amendment rights by the mere fact that she may be a public official. Pursuant to the plain language of Mont. Code Ann. § 2-2-121(3)(a), so long as a public officer or employee is not using "public time, facilities, equipment, supplies, personnel, or funds" she may engage in political speech. See Dahl v. Uninsured Employers' Fund, 1999 MT 168, ¶ 16, 295 Mont. 173, 983 P.2d 363.

Although "public time" is not defined, a reasonable construction would be those hours for which an employee receives payment from a public employer. Elected officials, of

Mr. Mathew J. Johnson
January 31, 2005
Page 3

course, do not have specific hours of employment nor do they receive vacation leave or other time off duty. They receive annual salaries rather than hourly wages. Thus, they could be considered to be on "public time" at all times. However, as long as public facilities, equipment, supplies, or funds are not involved, elected officials are not restricted in the exercise of political speech by the provisions of Montana law.

You also ask if subsection (3) prohibits a public employee or officer from signing a letter to the editor with his official title or prevents a law enforcement officer from wearing a uniform to campaign for a political issue or candidate. I conclude that, for the reasons stated above, subsection (3)(c) allows a public official to sign a letter to the editor, expressing personal political beliefs, with his official title, so long as public resources were not used to create the letter. Moreover, a sheriff would not be prohibited from wearing a uniform while campaigning for a political issue or candidate. In my opinion, neither activity would be prohibited by subsection (3).

Again, subsection (3)(a) only prevents use of "public time, facilities, equipment, supplies, personnel, or funds" in the furtherance of personal political speech. A title or a uniform is simply an accouterment of a public employee's or officer's position. A sheriff is not required to shed all associations, including his uniform, with his official position in order to exercise his protected right to express personal political beliefs.

The presumption is that free speech rights are protected and only the very specific restrictions in Mont. Code Ann. § 2-2-121 can be invoked to limit a public officer's or public employee's right to political speech.

THEREFORE, IT IS MY OPINION:

A public officer or public employee may engage in political speech so long as his or her speech does not involve the use of public time, facilities, equipment, supplies, personnel, or funds.

Very truly yours,

MIKE McGRATH
Attorney General

mm/anb/jym

2-2-121. Rules of conduct for public officers and public employees. (1) Proof of commission of any act enumerated in subsection (2) is proof that the actor has breached a public duty.

(2) A public officer or a public employee may not:

(a) subject to subsection (7), use public time, facilities, equipment, supplies, personnel, or funds for the officer's or employee's private business purposes;

(b) engage in a substantial financial transaction for the officer's or employee's private business purposes with a person whom the officer or employee inspects or supervises in the course of official duties;

(c) assist any person for a fee or other compensation in obtaining a contract, claim, license, or other economic benefit from the officer's or employee's agency;

(d) assist any person for a contingent fee in obtaining a contract, claim, license, or other economic benefit from any agency;

(e) perform an official act directly and substantially affecting to its economic benefit a business or other undertaking in which the officer or employee either has a substantial financial interest or is engaged as counsel, consultant, representative, or agent; or

(f) solicit or accept employment, or engage in negotiations or meetings to consider employment, with a person whom the officer or employee regulates in the course of official duties without first giving written notification to the officer's or employee's supervisor and department director.

(3) (a) Except as provided in subsection (3)(b), a public officer or public employee may not use public time, facilities, equipment, supplies, personnel, or funds to solicit support for or opposition to any political committee, the nomination or election of any person to public office, or the passage of a ballot issue unless the use is:

(i) authorized by law; or

(ii) properly incidental to another activity required or authorized by law, such as the function of an elected public officer, the officer's staff, or the legislative staff in the normal course of duties.

(b) As used in this subsection (3), "properly incidental to another activity required or authorized by law" does not include any activities related to solicitation of support for or opposition to the nomination or election of a person to public office or political committees organized to support or oppose a candidate or candidates for public office. With respect to ballot issues, properly incidental activities are restricted to:

(i) the activities of a public officer, the public officer's staff, or legislative staff related to determining the impact of passage or failure of a ballot issue on state or local government operations;

(ii) in the case of a school district, as defined in Title 20, chapter 6, compliance with the requirements of law governing public meetings of the local board of trustees, including the resulting dissemination of information by a board of trustees or a school superintendent or a designated employee in a district with no superintendent in support of or opposition to a bond issue or levy submitted to the electors. Public funds may not be expended for any form of commercial advertising in support of or opposition to a bond issue or levy submitted to the electors.

(c) This subsection (3) is not intended to restrict the right of a public officer or public employee to express personal political views.

(4) A candidate, as defined in 13-1-101(6)(a), may not use or permit the use of state funds for any advertisement or public service announcement in a newspaper, on radio, or on television that contains the candidate's name, picture, or voice except in the case of a state or national emergency and then only if the announcement is reasonably necessary to the candidate's official functions.

(5) A public officer or public employee may not participate in a proceeding when an organization, other than an organization or association of local government officials, of which the public officer or public employee is an officer or director is:

(a) involved in a proceeding before the employing agency that is within the scope of the public officer's or public employee's job duties; or

(b) attempting to influence a local, state, or federal proceeding in which the public officer or public employee represents the state or local government.

(6) A public officer or public employee may not engage in any activity, including lobbying, as defined in 5-7-102, on behalf of an organization, other than an organization or association of local government officials, of which the public officer or public employee is a member while performing the public officer's or public employee's job duties. The provisions of this subsection do not prohibit a public officer or public employee from performing charitable fundraising activities if approved by the public officer's or public employee's supervisor or authorized by law.

(7) A listing by a public officer or a public employee in the electronic directory provided for in 30-17-101 of any product created outside of work in a public agency is not in violation of subsection (2)(a) of this section. The public officer or public employee may not make arrangements for the listing in the electronic directory during work hours.

(8) A department head or a member of a quasi-judicial or rulemaking board may perform an official act notwithstanding the provisions of subsection (2)(e) if participation is necessary to the administration of a statute and if the person complies with the disclosure procedures under 2-2-131.

(9) Subsection (2)(d) does not apply to a member of a board, commission, council, or committee unless the member is also a full-time public employee.

(10) Subsections (2)(b) and (2)(e) do not prevent a member of the governing body of a local government from performing an official act when the member's participation is necessary to obtain a quorum or to otherwise enable the body to act. The member shall disclose the interest creating the appearance of impropriety prior to performing the official act.

History: En. 59-1706 by Sec. 6, Ch. 569, L. 1977; R.C.M. 1947, 59-1706; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 59, L. 1991; amd. Sec. 7, Ch. 562, L. 1995; amd. Sec. 3, Ch. 42, L. 1997; amd. Sec. 3, Ch. 122, L. 2001; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 58, L. 2003; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 145, L. 2005; amd. Sec. 3, Ch. 173, L. 2005; amd. Sec. 1, Ch. 437, L. 2005.

Compiler's Comments:

2005 Amendments -- Composite Section: Chapter 145 inserted (4) prohibiting a candidate for public office from using state funds for advertisement or public service announcement except in emergency and only if announcement reasonably necessary to candidate's official functions; and made minor changes in style. Amendment effective October 1, 2005.

Chapter 173 in (2)(a) at beginning inserted "subject to subsection (7)"; inserted (7) allowing a public officer or employee who creates a product outside of work to be listed in the electronic directory without violating public employee conduct standards, but prohibiting public officer or employee from making directory arrangements during work hours; and made minor changes in style. Amendment effective October 1, 2005.

Chapter 437 in (3)(a) at beginning inserted exception clause; inserted (3)(b)(ii) relating to school district compliance with laws governing public meetings of a board of trustees and any resulting dissemination of information on a bond issue or levy and prohibiting the use of public funds for commercial ads for or against a bond issue or levy; and made minor changes in style. Amendment effective April 28, 2005.

Source: Subsection (4) is based on North Carolina General Statutes, section 163-278.16A.

2003 Amendment: Chapter 58 in (4) near middle of introductory clause and in (5) near middle of first sentence after "organization" inserted "other than an organization or association of local government officials"; and made minor changes in style. Amendment effective February 28, 2003.

2001 Amendment: Chapter 122 in (3)(a) substituted "to solicit support for or opposition to any political committee, the nomination or election of any person to public office, or the passage of a ballot issue" for "for any campaign activity persuading or affecting a political decision"; in (3)(a)(ii) substituted references to an officer for references to an official; inserted (3)(b) relating to what is properly incidental to another activity required or authorized by law; inserted (3)(c) allowing expression

of personal political views; in (4) at beginning substituted "public officer or public employee" for "state employee" and throughout subsection substituted references to public officer or public employee for references to employee; in (4)(a) after "employing" deleted "state"; at end of (4)(b) after "state" inserted "or local government"; in (5) at beginning substituted "public officer or public employee" for "state officer or state employee" and throughout subsection substituted references to public officer or public employee for references to officer or employee; inserted (8) concerning local governing body member's official action and disclosure; deleted former (8) that read: "(8) A person who purposely or knowingly violates this section is guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction shall be punished by a fine of not less than \$50 or more than \$1,000, by imprisonment in the county jail for not more than 6 months, or by both. A civil proceeding under 2-2-136 or 2-2-144 does not preclude an action under this subsection"; and made minor changes in style. Amendment effective October 1, 2001.

1997 Amendment: Chapter 42 in (4)(a), after "employing", inserted "state". Amendment effective March 12, 1997.

1995 Amendment: Chapter 562 in (1) substituted "subsection (2)" for "this section" and substituted "a public" for "his fiduciary"; in (2), in two places in introductory clause, in (2)(a), and in (7) substituted "public" for "state"; in (2)(a) inserted "supplies, personnel, or funds"; inserted (3), (4), and (5) regarding rules of conduct for public or state officers or employees; in (6), after "complies with the", deleted "voluntary"; inserted (8) providing penalties; and made minor changes in style. Amendment effective July 1, 1995.

Preamble: The preamble attached to Ch. 562, L. 1995, provided: "WHEREAS, Article XIII, section 4, of the Montana Constitution is unambiguous in its intent of prohibiting conflict between public duty and private interest for members of the Legislature and for all state and local government officers and employees."

Severability: Section 25, Ch. 562, L. 1995, was a severability clause.

1991 Amendment: Inserted (2)(f) requiring a state officer or employee soliciting or accepting employment or engaging in negotiations or meetings regarding employment with a person whom he regulates to first notify his supervisor and Director in writing.